The Countess Margaret of Henneberg and her 365 children

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J R Soc Med 1996;**89**:711–716

SUMMARY

According to an obscure medieval legend, the Countess Margaret of Henneberg, a notable Dutch noblewoman, gave birth to 365 children in the year 1276. The haughty Countess had insulted a poor beggar woman carrying twins, since she believed that a pair of twins must have different fathers, and that their mother must be an adultress. She was punished by God, and gave birth to 365 minute children on Good Friday, 1276. The Countess died shortly after, together with her offspring, in the village of Loosduinen near The Hague. The Countess and her numerous brood were frequently described in historical and obstetrical works. To this day, a memorial tablet and two basins, representing those in which the 365 children were baptized, are to be seen in the church of Loosduinen.

INTRODUCTION

In May 1660, Samuel Pepys was visiting the Netherlands[1]. He travelled to the village of Loosduinen, which did not impress him greatly: it was 'a little small village' and at the tavern were 'a great many Dutch boors eating of fish in a boorish manner'. Samuel Pepys had come to Loosduinen to see a monument so justly famous that many thousands of people have made the same pilgrimage to the sleepy little Dutch village. In the church, he saw a wooden tablet with an inscription relating the story of the unfortunate Countess Margaret of Henneberg, who had given birth to 365 children on Good Friday in the year 1276. Samuel Pepys also saw the two basins in which the male and female children had been baptized. Although the church of Loosduinen has changed its appearance since the time of Samuel Pepys, the basins and wooden plates commemorating the Countess Margaret and her strange birth of 365 children can still be seen, hanging on the church wall (Figure 1). As in Samuel Pepys' time, the church of Loosduinen is visited by several thousand people interested in the legend of the Countess Margaret and her 365 children every year, henceforth referred to as the legend. There has been much speculation about the tradition's origins, and whether the legend might contain a grain of truth[2].

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE LEGEND

There is no doubt that Margaret of Henneberg was a historical person. She was born in 1234, the daughter of Count Floris IV of Holland. In 1249, she was married to Count Herman of Henneberg. She was deeply religious, and after the death of her son Herman in 1250 she spent much time with the nuns in the Loosduinen convent. On Good Friday 1276, the Countess Margaret, who was then staying at Loosduinen, was taken ill and died. Count Floris V, Margaret's nephew, visited her when she was very ill, and

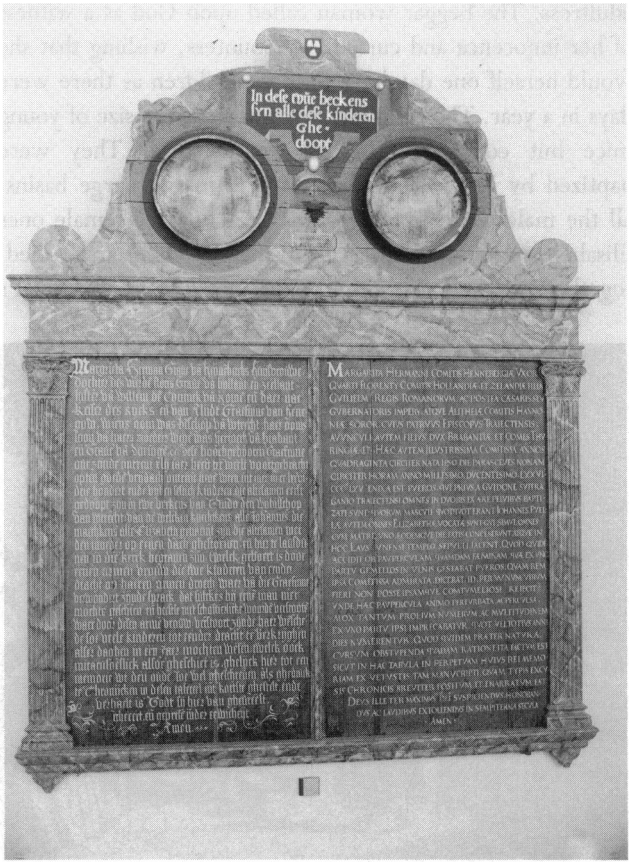

Figure 1 **The wooden tablets and the basins, as they can be seen today**

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wrote a letter at her request, distributing various gifts and bequests to two ladies-in-waiting. The original documents quoted in these accounts did not mention any miraculous birth. The Countess was buried in the church of Loosduinen Abbey, but the exact location of her tomb is unknown.

The scarce contemporary sources thus admit nothing remarkable about the death-bed of the Countess Margaret. The earliest document mentioning her strange delivery is the late fourteenth century Tabula of Egmond. For the year 1276, we read that:

> During Easter, Countess Margaret of Henneberg gave birth to 365 sons and daughters and died quietly, together with them. Her tomb is in Loosduinen, with a stone sarcophagus adorned with an epitaph in metal letters . . .

This inscription does not mention any extraordinary circumstances attached to her death. Other medieval chronicles, such as de Clerk's *Kronyk van Holland*, the *Chronica Novella* of Herman Korner and the *Croonijcke van Hollandt* of Jan van Naaldwijck, add several new details to the legend. The haughty Countess had observed a poor beggar woman carrying twins, and had taunted her for her immoral ways, since she was certain that a pair of twins must have different fathers and that the woman was thus an adultress. The beggar woman called upon God as a witness of her innocence and cursed the Countess, wishing that she would herself one day have as many children as there were days in a year. The resultant children were the size of young mice but completely human in structure. They were baptized by Bishop Guido of Utrecht in two large basins, all the male children being named Jan and the female ones Elisabeth. Soon after their baptism, the children all died, together with their mother. The poor beggar woman's prayers to God had called down His wrath on the Countess Margaret, and He had struck her with this gruesome judgment.

SOME SIXTEENTH CENTURY SOURCES ON THE LEGEND

In the early sixteenth century, Loosduinen had already become famous as a result of the legend of the Countess Margaret. Several sources hint that, in the 1500s, some kind of tombstone or monument could be seen inside the church. A wooden tablet was hanging on the church wall, and with it a basin in which the Countess Margaret's children had been baptized. It was the habit of childless women to come to Loosduinen Abbey and wash their hands in the basin, hoping that the potent magic of the legend would make them fertile again. It is recorded that in 1549 Loosduinen was visited by Crown Prince Philip of Spain; he went to the Abbey and heard the story of the legend. In 1572, there was a civil war in Holland, between Philip II and the insurgent troops of William of Orange. The Abbey of Loosduinen was completely ruined, and the old wooden tablet was destroyed by the iconoclasts, as well as the original basin. Some years later, when the Loosduinen Abbey had become a protestant church, one of its first rectors, the Reverend Jacobus Meursius, wanted to revive the legend. He had a new wooden tablet made, and two copper basins, which the Reverend had bought in a shop in Delft, were hung on each side of this inscription. The basins revered in the church today are thus nothing more than counterfeits. The superstitious people did not care about this: even after the Reformation, many sterile women came to Loosduinen to wash their hands in the basins the Reverend Mersius had hung up for them[3].

Figure 2 **A seventeenth century French engraving of the Pieter Kaerius drawing**

Figure 3 **The van Offel drawing of Meininger's painting of the legend**

Figure 4 **The Countess insults the poor beggar woman: a coarse drawing from the English black-letter ballad of 1620 (left). The Countess and her children, another drawing from the ballad (right)**

Another commemorative plate was made in these years; it is decorated with a drawing by Pieter Kaerius, dating from the early 1600s. This wooden plate has survived all wars and upheavals; today it hangs on the northern side of the church. The drawing of Pieter Kaerius was issued as a print in France during the seventeenth century (Figure 2). On the far left can be seen 'Les enfants dans le bassin' and on the right the poor Countess with her midwives, who are busy boiling water and preparing fresh linen. The Kaerius drawing is not the only illustration of the legend. In the private chapel of the Castle Thierberg in Kufstein is a painting by Michael Waginger, depicting both its main events; on the left, the Countess insults the poor beggar woman, and on the right, the minute children are baptized by the Bishop, in the presence of noblemen and church dignitaries. It is reproduced here (Figure 3) from a copy by E van Offel.

BRITISH PILGRIMS TO LOOSDUINEN

The accounts in many 16th century popular and scholarly works made the legend well known throughout Europe. Many travellers visited the church of Loosduinen to see and admire the basins and inscription. Already in 1593, Mr Fynes Moryson visited 'the village Lausdune' and its church during a stay in The Hague. He copied the text on the monument, with which he was apparently already acquainted since the Earl of Leicester had taken another copy of it to England. In 1622, James Howell went to The Hague and Loosduinen to see:

> a Church-Monument, where an Earl and a Lady are Engraven with Three Hundred Sixty Five Children about them, which were all Delivered at one Birth; they were half Male, half Female; the Bason hangs in the Church which carried them to be Christened, and the Bishops name who did it.

On September 1 1641, John Evelyn rode out from the Hague to visit 'the church of *Lysdun*, a desolate place', where he saw 'the monument of the woman, pretended to have been a Countess of Holland, reported to have had as many children at one birth as there are days in the year'. He also saw the basins and 'a large description of the

matter-of-fact in a frame of carved work'. It is of particular interest that Evelyn, Moryson and Howell all mention a monument in the church; according to Howell, this monument had the figure of the Count and Countess, with their 365 children about them. This, along with the contemporary Dutch sources, strongly hints that in the early 1600s there was some kind of picture or wood engraving in the church to commemorate the legend and its origin. The wooden tablets with the Dutch and Latin versions of the legend which can today be seen in the church of Loosduinen are the same ones seen by these seventeenth century writers. Various visitors have cut their initials, with the dates added, into the frames of the wooden tablets, or even into the tablets themselves; the earliest date is 1620.

In the early 1600s, the legend was described in several well-known English books[4]. In 1608, Edward Grimeston's *Generall Historie of the Netherlands* appeared, and in 1611 Coryat's *Crudities*; both had long and dramatic accounts of the legend. Coryat added that the story of the Countess Margaret 'is so absolutely true, as nothing in the world more'. Another contemporary work, John Stow's *Annales or A General Chronicle of England*, gives the insults of the haughty Countess towards the poor woman with quadruplets as 'Goe gette thou hence thou harlotte, thou shalt neuer make me beleeue, but those thy brattes had foure Fathers, thou insatiate strumpet!'. Either of these works may have inspired an illustrated black-letter ballad entitled *The Lamenting Lady*, printed in London in 1620[5]. This anonymous 21-stanza poem was directly inspired by the legend: as a divine punishment for her insults towards a poor woman with twins, an unnamed noble lady gives birth to as many infants as there are days in a year, 'in remembrance whereof, there is now a monument builded in the Citty of *Lowdon*, as many English men now liuing in *Lowdon*, can truely testifie the same and hath seene it'. The childless noblewoman envies the poor beggar woman who has twin children (Figure 4), and she taunts her with the words:

Thou art some Strumpet sure I know,
  and spend'st thy dayes in shame,
And stained sure thy marriage bed
  with spots of black defame:
Else vnto these two louely babes
  thou can no mother be,
When I liue in greatest grace
  no such content can see.

The twin mother answers her with a terrible curse, and the lady grows increasingly nervous during her pregnancy. When she sees the ghost of the beggar woman appear at night (Figure 4), she receives a terrible shock:

At which affright my bigg sweld wombe
  diliuered forth in feare
As many children at one time
  as daies were in the yeare:
In bigness all like newbred mice,
  yet each one shap'd aright,
And euery male from female knowne,
  by Gods great power and might.

SOME SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SOURCES ON THE LEGEND

In the seventeenth century, the legend achieved its widest distribution. Records of it survive from almost all European countries including Denmark, Spain, Wales and Ireland. It was considered a *Historia valde memorabilis*: a very memorable happening. The legend was reported, often in detail, in books on history, theology, philosophy and medicine, as well as in school books and books of popular anecdotes. It is particularly surprising that one of the few writers of this time who tried to dispose of various vulgar errors, Sir Thomas Browne, also accepted the legend in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*: 'Though wondrous strange, it may not be impossible what is confirmed at *Lausdun* concerning the Countess of Holland'.

One of the most famous specimens in the Kunst-kammer of King Frederick III of Denmark was alleged to be one of Countess Margaret's 365 children, which was kept in a small glass case. According to a museum catalogue, it was as long as a thumb, hanging from a golden chain in an oblong, translucent glass case. It was almost entirely black; only the minute nails were of a white colour. The missing infant in Copenhagen was mentioned in an anonymous work entitled *A Description of Holland*, published in 1741, with the words: 'One of the 365 children, or at least an Abortion given out to be one of them, is to be seen in Copenhagen'. The writer of this may actually have seen the specimen, and it is interesting that he likened it to an abortion; from the existing descriptions, this was probably its real origin. In the 1820s the Royal museum was dissolved by the government, and the Countess Margaret's alleged fetus was taken to the Royal Museum of Natural History, from whence it later disappeared without trace. Probably, the chairman of the Museum of Natural History, Professor Reinhart, had it scrapped along with several other medical specimens[6].

In the late 1700s, most people disbelieved the legend, and it was mentioned less often in encyclopaedias and historical works than before. The visitors to Loosduinen gradually became fewer during this time. One of them was the English traveller Samuel Ireland, who went from The Hague to Loosduinen in 1789. He considered the legend very silly and trifling, and although he was shown the copper basins he remained incredulous. In 1836, another visitor to

Loosduinen, the Danish aesthete Niels Laurits Høyen, was even more scornful. He had been on a guided tour through the church and the sight of the two basins inspired the following tirade:

> How whimsical Fate is! Two thin, wretched brass basins are kept for hundreds of years through a ridiculous tradition, while in the same time, so many works of art and things of permanent value were destroyed . . .

THE LEGEND IN MEDICINE

Many medical writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Ambroise Paré and Pierre Boaisteau among them, accepted the legend uncritically. Some writers used the legend to prove the concept that a woman could have an infinite number of children. The Dutch anatomist Ludolph Smid regarded it as a reality, since he had once dissected an ovary with a very large number of ova. This would, according to him, make it feasible for a woman to have even as many as 365 children, provided that the ova were simultaneously impregnated. One of the last medical men to take the legend seriously was the English obstetrician Dr John Maubray, who had probably visited Loosduinen. In his book *The Female Physician*, published in 1724, he wrote that 'The basons are still to be seen in the village church of Losdun, where all strangers go on purpose from the Hague, being reckoned among the great curiosities of Holland'. Maubray was an extremely credulous character, and he became notorious among his contemporaries for endorsing, in the same book, the odd notion that the Dutch women, if they spent too much time before their hot stoves, might give birth to an ill-looking, rat-like little animal called *de Suyger* or *Sooterkin*. He was also involved in the scandal surrounding the notorious Mary Toft, an illiterate English peasant woman from Godalming who managed to trick King George I, the Prince of Wales and several distinguished obstetricians and men of science that she had given birth to 17 rabbits. Maubray was severely ridiculed in a pamphlet titled *A Letter from a Male Physician in the Country, to the Author of the Female Physician in London*, which was published in 1726. According to the pamphlet-writer, if the Godalming rabbit-breeder had not been exposed, her place of birth would have

> been as famous in History to After-Ages, as ever *Losdun* in *Holland* was; and drawn in as many People to pay for seeing the Rabbet there, as ever were in *Losdun* to see the basins, wherein the 365 Children, born at one time, were baptized.

By the late nineteenth century, the legend of the Countess Margaret and her 365 children had become almost totally forgotten in medical circles, but it later reappeared in quite another context: it was suggested that the 365 children had really been a hydatidiform mole[7–8]. The Countess Margaret has even regained some of her lost fame by being quoted as the first known patient to lose her life after the expulsion of a hydatidiform mole[9]. The proponents of this theory suggest that the cysts were likened to children by people who had never before seen a hydatidiform mole, and that the Countess died from a haemorrhage after its expulsion. It should be noted, though, that it would take an extremely vivid imagination to see any likeness between these cysts and human fetuses. To accept this theory, it must also be presumed that the obstetrical attendants of the Countess were quite unfamiliar with hydatidiform moles. Nowadays, these moles occur once in about 2000 pregnancies, and they are nearly 10 times more common in developing countries.

LEGENDS OF MULTIPLE BIRTHS

A closer study of the medieval mythology about multiple births makes it obvious that the legend is only one of a group of similar myths, which we may term 'The beggar with twins and the wicked noblewoman'[2]. The medieval tale of the origin of the noble house of Guelph has many similarities to the legend. Irmentrude, Countess of Altdorf, one day scolded a poor mother of triplets for her immoral life, since she firmly believed that the triplets must have different fathers. She herself gave birth to no fewer than 12 boys, which shocked her very much, since she believed that people would think that they had 12 different fathers! She ordered the midwife to drown 11 of the boys, but at the river the midwife chanced upon the Count, who asked her what she was doing. She said that she was drowning some newborn puppies (or *Welfs*), but this lie was its own undoing, since the dog-loving Count wanted to keep some of them to be trained as hounds. He then discovered the truth and ordered the midwife to feed and rear all 12 infants. When they were 6 years old the Count pardoned his erring wife, and ordered that his 12 sons were henceforth to be called not Counts of Altdorff but Guelphs.

A similar legend concerned the French family de Trazegnies. In 1276 a noble châtelaine encountered a poor mendicant woman with twins, and insulted her for her immoral life. The beggar cursed her, hoping that she would give birth to as many children as a sow, an animal that was just then passing them by in the street. Nine months later, the noble lady gave birth to 13 children, and she tried to hide her shame by ordering them all to be drowned. They were saved by her husband, who was just returning from the wars; these children took the family name de Trazegnies (Treize-nés in thirteenth century French). Several new elements are encountered in the legend of the Porcelets. The pregnant wife of the Lord of Arles met the inevitable mendicant woman, this time carrying triplets in her arms,

and dismissed her with the usual taunts. The beggar woman answered her with the words 'You are wicked as a sow, and like that unclean animal, you will disgust all those present at your childbed'. Then, according to one version, the lady herself gave birth to nine little pigs! The earliest versions of the Trazegnies and Porcelets legends are from the sixteenth century, but the concept of multiple births as a shameful thing goes far back in medieval times.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the mid-1800s, the legend was still revered in Loosduinen[2]. The simple villagers used to point out a hill on a meadow named Bergweij as the situation of the former Castle Henneberg. Here the Count and Countess had lived extravagantly and immorally, wining and dining while the poor people starved. After the death of the Countess, this second Sodom was laid waste by God, as a punishment for the dissolute lives of the Hennebergs. It was rumoured that the hill was haunted, and many Loosduinen villagers ruined their night's sleep by listening in vain for the sounds of a party, with rumbling of kitchen utensils, coming from the former site of the Henneberg castle.

Today, knowledge of the Countess Margaret and her extraordinary birth is restricted to the people of Loosduinen and The Hague, apart from the occasional ethnologist. The antiquity of the tradition has few parallels in Europe, among them the English medieval conjoined twins, the Biddenden Maids[10], who were said to have been born in the year 1100. It is truly amazing to contemplate the pan-European acceptance of the legend in the seventeenth century, among historians, antiquaries and medical men. Many people found the moral of the story edifying: the haughty noblewoman was punished for her high-handed treatment of the beggar with twins, creating the illusion that God was on the side of the poor, and He was ready to avenge the ills brought on by the evil rich people.

By far the best-known explanation of the legend is that it was originally the result of a chronological intricacy[11]. The proponents of this theory remain undecided about the exact nature of this intricacy, but the main points are that in the 1270s the new year started during Easter, and the Countess had as many children as there had been days in the new year (or, according to some, as many children as there were days left in the year). In any case, the Countess had only two (or three) children, and this was noted in the chronicles as 'as many children as there were (~~or~~ had been) days in the year'. These presumed 'chronicles' are not in existence today[2]. In both the Tabula of Egmond and the de Clerk chronicle, the number of children is specifically given as 365. If the twin theory were to be accepted, this would also imply that this odd habit of chronology was current in the 1270s and not only defunct but virtually *forgotten* in the 1350s.

From the arguments presented here, it is likely that the Loosduinen legend was the foremost version of a widespread medieval myth which can be called 'the beggar with twins and the wicked noblewoman'. Probably, it was also the origin of all the other versions of this myth. Whether the legend had any foundation in reality cannot now be resolved. One possibility is that the mythical paraphernalia—the beggar woman, the insult and the curse—may have been added to a pre-existing popular tradition that something odd had happened at the death-bed of the Countess on Good Friday 1276. This may just possibly have been due to a quirk of the calendar, as suggested by many writers, but strong arguments speak against this theory; the suggestion of a hydatidiform mole seems rather more credible. Another possibility is that the whole thing belongs to the realm of fantasy, and that the Countess Margaret was wholly undeserving of her great fame before posterity.

Acknowledgments Financial support (to JB) from the Crafoord Foundation (Lund, Sweden) is gratefully acknowledged. This paper is an abstract from a longer book on this subject[2], published by the Stichting oud Loosduinen, Loosduinen, Holland.

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